

21st August 2022

Jeremiah 1; 6-10 Luke 13; 10-17

That is not what it's for!

God of the Sabbath, this is the day, and this is the hour when women long oppressed learn to stand with dignity, when your healing escapes our desire for control: may your joy stretch the fabric of our hearts and inspire us to loose each other's bonds; through Jesus Christ, the shamer of the powerful and the raiser of the dead. Amen. (Prayers for an inclusive church)

What is the Sabbath for? Any suggestions...

Or we could consider the alternative: what is the Sabbath not for? Again, any suggestions.

The essence of Sabbath is simple: *remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy*. Quite simple really – to remember and to keep holy. To remember what God did, and what God didn't do. To learn from God, and to live that out, making things holy. The Sabbath became one of the centre pieces of the Covenant God established with the people. And over the years, the Sabbath became a long list, particularly of what should NOT be done, and all in the name of honouring God, but the truth is that most of that long list was not what it was for! It became an empty remembrance and a burden, and little honour left in it. This is clear in the Gospel reading today.

Jesus is in a synagogue teaching, and this woman walks in – for 18 years her life has been limited, she is bent over unable to stand. And take note: ***she asks for nothing*** – it is Jesus who calls her and then frees her, and she can now stand straight and walk and she begins praising God. Why do the Pharisees complain that the Sabbath has been broken? I believe the Sabbath has been remembered and kept holy, because this woman's life has been transformed, and she praises God while all the religious leaders present moan.

Wasn't Sabbath the most holy of days? Wasn't it the time where everything else came to a halt? And then it seemed to develop into something where "doing nothing" became more important than doing what should be done.

- **Where do we draw the defining line between not doing anything, and doing what should be done?**
- **How do you resolve this matter?**
- **What things cannot wait a moment longer?**

I personally believe that over the centuries, it has been attitudes such as that of the Pharisees that have put people off the church, where people have felt excluded; and sadly, in many places' attitudes such as the one we read about today, are still present. I believe most of us can think of some person who has been felt the church is not a place for them because of similar situations. The Pharisees of that time, and of this time, as all interest groups seek power and prestige above all, so claim only their answers are true and everybody who is not part of their group is in error.

Reading the Gospels we can find various times in Jesus' ministry, that one thing is clear – Sabbath was never meant to be a prison, it was a liberation from enslavement, a celebration of

humanity in its fullness, and this continues to be as valid and necessary in our times as it was when Moses came down from the mountain, or when Jesus saw this woman suffering. Re-read the gospel passage and discover what Jesus says...

The Pharisees' vision of the Sabbath clearly is not what the Sabbath is for. Their vision is one that limits life, not enhancing the will of God for life. Jesus makes this so clear, that it will soon become one of the reasons for which he is judged and found guilty. Jesus' vision is so different that he calls the Pharisees hypocrites – and they didn't like this. They are put to shame and the crowds celebrate the liberation God offers.

And this passage from Luke is yet another reminder that Jesus cares more about people and their needs than about theological accuracy. Of course the value of Sabbath was/is important, but not to the detriment of fullness of life, which is what Jesus comes for. This is what the Pharisees never understood.

Last Thursday I was reading this book I have: *The Longing in between*, a collection of sacred poems from around the world. And I came across this short poem written by a woman called Lalla, she was a XIV century holy woman from Kashmir – she said: "*Learning the scriptures is easy; but living them, that's hard. Far easier to read words on a page than to seek the living heart of things*" and realised this is what the Gospel reading is saying today.

And in reading the words of the prophet Jeremiah, we see that he is trying to help the people who are returning from exile to remember their identity. How God has called him to help the people discern what God is doing. Inspiring to see how both Jeremiah and Jesus have so much in common. And this includes the way the powers of the world will treat them, both are rejected, both are tortured. Both die unjustly.

So how does all this challenge us? I invite you to consider the Thought for the week in the Weekly News: ***Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.*** I am convinced this is the key, connected to the true meaning of Sabbath and the call of the prophet: *to pluck up and to pull down, to build and to plant*. To discover what really matters and be part of that – as Jesus does for the woman, even if the Pharisees rejected this. Jesus has clearly set out the will of God – life restored and celebrated. **That is what it is for!**

In just a few moments we will sing Rejoice and Sing 652 (= *God, when human bonds are broken*); I have chosen this hymn because each verse has words that help us understand what Sabbath is not about, and what we can be doing to make the world a better place and the church a more welcoming place.

When we take the bread and the cup today, we are affirming that vision of Jesus, this cost him his life so that we could have life in fullness.

Glory be to the Creator, to the Liberator, to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and will be for ever.